Skepticism and the Question of Community

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Let me begin with an offer, namely, the thesis that the great community is the one that preserves the question of community and hence is the community of the question, the interrogative community, where individuals are brought together out of recognition of each other as questioners and, through their conflicts, experience an intrinsic dependence upon each other for the very formulation of the question of community as well as for its perhaps always provisional resolution. In order that this offer may be tendered effectively, I will argue for the primacy of a kind of skepticism as the only mode of keeping human company with other persons. This will entail a critique of various ways of formulating the question of community and of the epistemic resources upon which these formulations depend. Finally, the notion of the interrogative community that I propose will be analyzed relative to two contemporary definitions of community, respectively, those of hermeneutics and liberalism. I shall turn principally to the later thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in my discussion of the interrogative community and the skepticism which engenders and nourishes its life.

The Ironic Skepticism of the Interrogative Community

It is Merleau-Ponty who writes that Being is in the interrogative mode, and within this he wishes to include the Being of community. But is it
not the case that many of our communities and philosophers of community too often than not respond as if the question of community has been not only adequately formulated but also already answered? And herein lies their fate, at once monotonous and tragic. The compulsion to answer the question of community extinguishes the wonder that motivates the renewal of communal life, that marks its secret resources, its enigmas, its ambiguities, its incessant mystery. The obsession for the security and certainty of an answer—at times it would seem almost any answer—seeks to tame the excess of the existential question (in contradistinction to the banal question), namely, the questioner himself or herself coming into fragile expression and possession of his or her powers through the question of community and realizing that he or she, as existential questioner/question, is always in-between answers or out on the ragged margins of the answer where there are fissures, sudden gaps, and rumors of something fathomless. As Nietzsche was prone to note, answers suppress the existential question insofar as they insinuate themselves into the very formulation of the question, hide themselves in the words and between the words of the question, words that have not only a professed meaning but also, in their very arrangement, sudden shoots into a culturally dense foliage of meaning, and on into a subterranean and ancient tangle of roots.

If the Being of the community is in the interrogative mode, if the communal person is a question to himself or herself, then, given whatever concrete form it may take, is the question of community ultimately decidable? If the community of the question is by its very nature of the question, if the question is not only constitutive of all true community but also the secret of its perpetual masking of itself in anguish before itself in an answer held too tightly, then a kind of good skepticism, a good irony, may well be the existential praxis, the therapeutic, that keeps the horizon of community life open, i.e., keeps us available for each other in the ceaseless shaping of the ever strange and elusive question which has us.

What is this good and vigilant skepticism of which I speak? I propose that it is what the later Merleau-Ponty, in his own self-critique, named the hyperdialectic. But it must be acknowledged from the outset that Merleau-Ponty denies that the hyperdialectic is "skepticism, vulgar relativism, of the reign of the ineffable." Perhaps the tension between my proposal for skepticism and Merleau-Ponty's ostensible rejection of it can be resolved by looking at how he understands the hyperdialectic, how it stands relative to certain notions of reason and skepticism, and its consequences for the question of community which will remain, at this juncture, still unformulated.